

# The Bred, the Wed, and the Dead

## An Introduction to U.S. Vital Records

In the United States, researchers often start by searching for vital records or records of births, marriages, and deaths. This class is designed to provide you with a basic understanding of U.S. vital records, including the various types of records, the civil jurisdictions that have responsibilities for the records, and the regional differences in the availability of those records.

### History and Background

Vital records are records of births, marriages, and deaths kept by a civil government. In the United States, the individual states are responsible for determine when (and if) vital records are kept. The type, content, and availability of vital records varies by time period and location. Typically, marriages, a legal contract, were kept by most localities from the date each county was settled. Births and deaths were recorded starting in the mid to late 1800s as society became interested in demographics and public health. Vital records may be kept by towns, counties, or states.

Vital records were usually recorded on ledgers in paragraph format. Vital records in the 19th century are often found in registers. By the 20th century, most locations were recording vital events on certificates.

### Using Vital Records

Once you have located a vital record, make sure to read through and evaluate the record. Read every field. Determine who provided the information (the informant). Also consider which information is primary information (recorded at or near the time of the event) and which information is secondary (recorded after the event).

On a death certificate, learn more about the cause of death by identifying the ICD code. ICD stands for International Classification of Diseases. The code was originally published in 1893 and has been revised multiple times. View the difference revisions of the code at <http://www.wolfbane.com/icd/>.

When searching for marriage records, consider that your ancestor may have married in a Gretna Green. A Gretna Green is a favored marriage location which may have had fewer restrictions for those wishing to marry. There are many Gretna Greens throughout the United States. Identify Gretna Greens which are located close to your ancestor's residence. Learn more about Gretna Greens at [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Gretna\\_Greens\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Gretna_Greens_in_the_United_States).

### Finding Vital Records

Many online genealogy websites include vital record collections. Note that vital and church records are often combined. Make sure to evaluate each collection carefully and verify it includes records for the time period and county where your ancestor was born, married, or died.

- **FamilySearch** (<https://www.familysearch.org>) – To view a list of vital record collections, click “Search,” “Records,” and then “Browse All Collections.” Use the “Filter by Collection Title” field at the top left to enter the name of the state and type of vital record or use the filters on the left.
- **Ancestry** (<https://www.ancestry.com>) (\$) – To view a list of vital record collections, click “Search” and then “Birth, Marriage, and Death” or “Search” and then “Card Catalog.” In the title field, enter the name of the state and type of vital record or use the filters on the left.

- **MyHeritage** (<https://www.myheritage.com>) (\$) – To view a list of vital record collections, click “Research” and then “Birth, Marriage & Death” or “Research” and then “Collection Catalog.” Use the filters on the left.
- **Findmypast** (<https://www.findmypast.com>) (\$) – To view a list of vital record collections, click “Search” and then “All Record Sets.” Use the filters on the left. Especially look for the collection titled “United States Marriages.”
- **American Ancestors** (<https://www.americanancestors.org>) (\$) To view a list of vital record collections, click “Search” and then “A to Z list of all databases.” Note that American Ancestors has many vital record collections from New England.

There are a number of states who have created databases of vital records. Some states with online vital record collections are listed below. Also look for local libraries and archives to have indexes and/or images of vital records.

- **Arizona** (<https://www.azdhs.gov/licensing/vital-records/genealogy/index.php>) – Includes index and images for births (1800-1947) and deaths (1800-1972).
- **Illinois** (<https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/databases/home.html>) – Includes index for marriages (1763-1900) and deaths (pre-1916 and 1916-1950).
- **Oklahoma** (<https://ok2explore.health.ok.gov/>) – Includes indexes for births and deaths starting 1908.
- **Michigan** (<https://michiganology.org/vital-records/>) – Includes index and images for death records dating from 1897 through seventy-five years ago.
- **Missouri** (<https://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/birthdeath/> and <https://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/Archives/ArchivesMvc/DeathCertificates/>) – Includes birth and death records (pre-1910) and death certificates (1910-1970).
- **Utah** (<https://archives.utah.gov/digital/81443.htm>, <https://archives.utah.gov/digital/81448.htm>) – Includes index and images for births (1905-1917) and deaths (1905-1969).
- **West Virginia** ([http://archive.wvculture.org/vrr/va\\_select.aspx](http://archive.wvculture.org/vrr/va_select.aspx)) – Includes index and images for births (1853-1946), marriages (1853-1969), and deaths (1853-1971). Note there are gaps in the records depending on county.

Learn more about vital records and ordering vital records.

- **FamilySearch Research Wiki** ([https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Vital\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Vital_Records)) – Determine when states started keeping vital records. Also learn about record loss, gaps in the records, privacy laws, and information about ordering vital records.
- **VitalRec** (<https://www.vitalrec.com>) – Determine when states started keeping vital records, privacy laws, and information about ordering vital records.
- **VitalChek** (<https://www.vitalchek.com>) – Order vital records.